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Individualism and National Identity in Disney's Early British Films

Abstract

This article centres on a series of live-action Disney movies filmed and set in Britain, and released between the early-1950s and late-1960s: *The Story of Robin Hood and His Merrie Men* (1952), *The Sword and the Rose* (1953), *Rob Roy*, *The Highland Rogue* (1953), *Kidnapped* (1960), and *The Fighting Prince of Donegal* (1966). Through close analysis of this group of films, it examines the extent to which these Anglo-American productions successfully negotiate a mid-Atlantic path between British and North American customs and ideologies, arguing that, while derived from British historical, literary and folktale narratives, ultimately they reflect and embody complex and characteristically American values of freedom and individualism.

Keywords

Disney, individualism, national identity, 1950s, Britain

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With the release of *Treasure Island* (dir. Byron Haskin) in 1950, Disney embarked upon a programme of live-action feature films shot in Britain, and with British subjects. *Treasure Island* marked the beginning of a very profitable and long-standing preoccupation with 'Britishness' for the studio and for its founder, Walt Disney. Representations of Britain and Britishness are recurring presences in many of the studio's animated films between the 1950s and 1970s, including *Alice in Wonderland* (Clyde Geronimi et al., 1951), *Peter Pan* (Geronimi et al., 1953), *The Jungle Book* (Wolfgang Reitherman et al., 1967), and *Robin Hood* (Reitherman et al., 1973). Moreover, Disney's strong interest in Britain extended to filming 15 of its movies in the UK between 1950 and 1979. Five of these films are of particular interest here: *The Story of Robin Hood and His Merrie Men* (Ken Annakin, 1952), *The Sword and the Rose* (Annakin, 1953), *Rob Roy*, *The Highland Rogue* (Harold French, 1953), *Kidnapped* (Robert Stevenson, 1960), and *The Fighting Prince of Donegal* (Michael O'Herlihy, 1966).

These Technicolor productions were modest, low-budget affairs, and have largely escaped serious scholarly analysis. They are primarily lightweight, escapist adventure narratives, competently and colourfully assembled in the unadorned style which characterised Disney's early-period live-action films. Their aesthetic sensibilities are filtered through a gauzy, nostalgic image of Britain and 'Britishness'; a sort of mid-Atlantic folk memory, rooted in pleasurable associations and belief systems. However, far from being simple and vacuous exploitation releases, these apparently artless and undistinguished productions reflect complex ideologies of freedom and individualism through the rugged pastoral landscapes they invoke. These films are inherently liminal. They were made in Britain with largely British production personnel, filmed on location, and often drew on indigenous mythologies and literary traditions. On the other hand, they were produced for an international audience by an American firm, and were very much driven by Walt Disney's guiding hand. Do they

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successfully negotiate a mid-Atlantic path between British and North American customs and ideologies? Or, rather, do they merely pay lip service to notions of ‘Britishness’ while advancing specifically American conceptions of national identity and individualism?

Words for a Discussion

This article is concerned with these British Disney films’ *constructions* of Britain and Britishness. As such, it follows works by the likes of Andrew Higson (1995) and Jeffrey Richards (1997) in exploring how nation and identity is represented in popular cinema – representations which may enter into a fundamental conflict with lived reality, but which nevertheless reveal a cultural desire for the values they invoke and embody. The curiosity of these films lies in their fragmented cultural identity, with their core concepts and images assembled from a multitude of sources. British historical, literary and folkloric influences are clearly apparent, with *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* adapted from Robert Louis Stevenson’s late-nineteenth-century novels, *The Story of Robin Hood* from English medieval folktale, and *The Sword and the Rose*, *Rob Roy*, *the Highland Rogue* and *The Fighting Prince of Donegal* respectively derived, however tenuously, from English Tudor, eighteenth-century Scottish and sixteenth-century Irish history. But several of these films are sourced more directly from North American adaptations or appropriations of these stories. Stevenson’s books, of course, had long been a fixture in public libraries, private bookshelves, and school curricula; furthermore, both *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* had previously been adapted by Hollywood. *The Story of Robin Hood* owes less to British mythology than to the undeniably fictionalised novel, *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (1883), by the American writer and illustrator Howard Pyle. It is here that the familiar band of outlaws (Little John, Friar Tuck et

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al.) originates, and where King Richard returns from his crusades to pardon Robin. Similarly, *The Sword and the Rose* was based on the bestselling novel *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (1898) by the American lawyer and writer Charles Major, and the 1901 Broadway play based on the novel. Finally, *The Fighting Prince of Donegal* derives from Nebraskan author Robert T. Reilly's 1957 novel, *Red Hugh: Prince of Donegal*.

The key point is that all of these ostensibly British fictions had been thoroughly colonised, reinterpreted and recapitulated in North America. The overriding question is the extent to which they reflect North American (as opposed to British) ideologies. It is important to note that, despite their inherent reductionism, they do deal with a geographically and nationally differentiated Britain, with films set in Scotland and Ireland as well as England, thus moving beyond the parochial Englishness the majority of so-called 'British' films invoke. Beyond their British historical and mythological settings, their most obvious link is their individualist and anti-imperialist fervour. While softened by the need to engage with child audiences, they strongly affirm the need to fight for freedom from socio-economic oppression. At first glance, in their idealistic visions of the inspiring military campaigns of Robin Hood, Rob Roy and 'Red' Hugh O'Donnell (the eponymous 'fighting prince of Donegal') and their band of followers against an invasive and tyrannical enemy, these films appear to endorse a form of pantisocratic collectivism, of the type Coleridge and Southey idealistically envisaged, significantly in the 'New World' of the United States. But on closer inspection, the small-scale communities they evoke actually fall under the ultimate authority of a lone figure, a charismatic and galvanising leader. This is not collectivism, but rather its putative antithesis, individualism.

Individualism, it has often been observed, carries strong North American associations. Steve Lukes defines it as

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the actual or imminent realisation of the final stage of human progress in a spontaneously cohesive society of equal individual rights, limited government, *laissez-faire*, natural justice and equal opportunity, and individual freedom, moral development and dignity. (37)

In 1888, James Bryce, writing in *The American Commonwealth*, observed that ‘Individualism, the love of enterprise, and pride in personal freedom, have been deemed by Americans not only their choicest, but their peculiar and exclusive possessions’ (270). Yehoshua Arieli later wrote that ‘individualism expressed the universalism and idealism most characteristic of the [American] national consciousness’ (345-46). Finally, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great proponent of American individualism, insisted that:

The union [...] is only perfect when all the uniters are isolated [...] Each man, if he attempts to join himself to others, is on all side cramped and diminished [...] The Union must be ideal in actual individualism. (Lukes, 38-39)

The idea of individualism is everywhere in US political doctrine and cultural expression, and as several other critics have noted, these values are articulated time and again, in various guises and across a broad time span, in Disney’s films.¹

This is not unrepresentative of Hollywood family entertainment’s wider emphasis on individual agency *within* a family or communal context. As Justyna Fruzińska argues:

The model of the Disney Company’s films is strongly Emersonian, with the hero being different (and better) than his/her surroundings, listening to his/her heart and striving at self-realisation whatever the cost [...] Emerson’s self-reliance is one of the key constituents of American identity, which allows one to view the Disney Company as expressing a sort of national myth. (2)

But individualism might also be said to be localised within the figure of Walt Disney himself, and in the organisational structure of the company he built (alongside his more pecuniary-minded brother, Roy) from the ground up. As Alan Bryman observes, Walt Disney's 'life story [...] [is] a paean to individualism, a Horatio Alger story of overcoming all odds to achieve success' (192-93).

Indeed, the British subjects of these films reflect primarily American attitudes regarding the individual, and Disney's selective appropriation of their source narratives reflects their strongly individualistic qualities. They are tales of strong, handsome, indefatigable heroes fighting for a righteous cause against despicable, cowardly and usually imperialistic enemies who have abused their positions of power by invading territory to which they have no claim. It is easy to see how England might serve, in these films, as a convenient symbol of economic and military oppression. Such depictions doubtless echo nationalistic rhetoric dating back to the War (and subsequent Declaration) of Independence. Yet in their central political overtones these films correspond with North America's projected ideals of the 1950s and 1960s: democracy, responsibly small-scale capitalism, freedom, close affinity with the land, and mistrust of Big Government, high taxes and advanced industrialisation. Furthermore, Walt Disney himself saw in Scotland's Jacobite rebels in *Rob Roy* 'A great love of *liberty* and *beauty*' (Brode, 63) which he claimed to share, and he held a deep and oft-stated affinity with Ireland (the land of his great-grandfather), which doubtless informed his production of *The Fighting Prince of Donegal*.

Disney in Britain

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Some discussion of Disney's first British production, *Treasure Island*, seems a necessary prelude to analysis of the later films. Released in June 1950, it was a significant departure from Disney's established style: it was Disney's first fully live-action film, and also unashamedly escapist, free from the artistic pretensions of the studio's earlier animated films. When Walt Disney acquired the adaptation rights to Robert Louis Stevenson's 1883 novel from MGM, he intended to shoot the movie in Hollywood (Scheur). His decision to film in Britain – at Denham Studios, and on location in Cornwall, Devon and Bristol – was a matter of financial expediency. At this point, British trade restrictions designed to boost local industry prevented foreign companies from exporting 100 per cent of earned capital. The only viable recourse for Hollywood studios was to reinvest the frozen capital in locally-produced films.

Treasure Island's enduring appeal in the US has already been noted, but it is well to remember its huge popularity in Britain. It ranked inside the top five most popular books among 12-year-old and 13-year-old British schoolboys in A. L. Jenkinson's 1940 survey (Richards 1988, 60); it was a perennial pantomime subject; and it was serialised by BBC Radio in June and July 1950 to coincide with the release of the film, a version which featured narration by the film's young star, Bobby Driscoll. *Treasure Island*, like the later British Disney films, was made for the home market as well as for US audiences; indeed, they appealed hugely in Britain, with *Treasure Island* the second highest-grossing film at the British box office in 1950 (Whitey, 'It's a Photo Finish'). Stylistically, though, it is of a kind with Hollywood productions, with the sort of gaudy, storybook visualisation of the 'Old World' associated with big-screen historical romances. Its evocation of an earlier era – with such tokenistic historical trappings as horse-drawn carriages, cobbled streets, white cliffs and pirates who shout 'Arrr!' – is little more than semantic texture. 'Britishness' as a concept, as

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well as an image bank, is very much in play, but the films' inherited motifs are hard to locate, at least with much specificity, in 1950s Britain.

'Uncle Walt' famously oversaw almost all aspects of production on his animated features. He saw himself as 'a little bee' moving 'from one area of the studio to another' to 'gather pollen and sort of stimulate everybody' (Wells, 77). Based in California, Disney was unable to devote as much attention to his British films, and accounts differ as to the extent of his involvement. *Treasure Island* director Byron Haskin recalled that Disney was 'almost wholly detached from the film, the writing and editing included', but set designer Gus Walaker remembered him showing keen interest in his work (Barrier, 222). Michael Barrier observes that *Treasure Island*'s 'serious and often foreboding' tone and higher level of screen violence – one of the pirates is seen being shot in the face at point-blank range; others are stabbed and slashed with cutlasses – 'was new for a Disney feature', but counters that 'there is no reason to believe that Disney was not fully aware of it or that it did not have his approval' (222). And according to Ken Annakin, who directed *The Story of Robin Hood*, the storyboards for that film had already been completed – presumably by Disney himself – by the time he was assigned, so as to 'enable Walt to exercise control, and supply his creative input from six thousand miles away' (Barrier, 224). The balance of evidence would suggest that Disney still exerted considerable influence over these films, even if his daily involvement was greatly abbreviated.

While British critical responses were largely positive – the *Daily Mirror* proclaimed it 'the best children's picture yet made for grown-ups' – the film's curious dialectic between its British source and American inflections was noted by several observers (Whitey, 'Best Children's Film'). The *Sunday Times*' Dilys Powell reassured readers that 'in spite of an American producer, director and screenplay, in spite of an American Jim Hawkins, the film looks reasonably British'. The *Manchester Guardian* regretted that British directors Carol

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Reed or David Lean ('both of them magnificent in directing children') had not beat Disney to the source text, deeming the film's blazing Technicolor 'a destroyer of mystery' ('New Films in London'). Technicolor, it should be remembered, was still rarely seen in British films, and almost never in child-orientated movies; it was a marker of Americanness as much as exoticism. The *Observer's* C. A. Lejeune lamented Disney's juvenilisation of the source material, thinking the film 'less of a buccaneer adventure than a thoroughly well-organised party game', and criticised the casting of US child actor Bobby Driscoll, who 'is still very much a child' and 'suggest[s] the tender child that every boy hopes he has outgrown'. The *Catholic Herald's* Grace Conway, though, felt otherwise, praising the 'rugged quality' of Driscoll's speech in preference to British actor Robert Newton's 'somewhat synthetic West Country variety' ('The Island That Must Be Visited'). If Conway's criticisms of Newton's performance remind us that 'authenticity' in performance and representation are not simply reducible to national specificities, then these other responses demonstrate that questions of national identity cannot wholly be left behind where films attempt to cross cultural and national borders.

Disney and British National Identity

The Story of Robin Hood signals an important departure from *Treasure Island* in its emphasis on tension points within British national identity. Indeed, two antithetical forms of 'Englishness' are here played against each other. The first, embodied by Robin Hood (Richard Todd), his murdered father (Reginald Tate), the 'merrie men', Maid Marian (Joan Rice), and King Richard the Lion Heart (Patrick Barr), represents idealised freedom of movement and expression (within legal and ethical parameters), bravery, physicality, affinity

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with natural surroundings, self-reliance, friendship and community, camaraderie, humour, honest simplicity in dress, manners and lifestyle, classlessness, and sexual egalitarianism (localised in Maid Marian's feistiness and capacity for self-reliance). In later films, many of these attributes are transferred to Scottish and Irish rebels struggling to overcome an invading England, which has come to represent the undesirable qualities here embodied in the villainous Prince John (Hubert Gregg) and Sheriff of Nottingham (Peter Finch): cruelty, perfidiousness, cowardliness, rule by fear and intimidation rather than by consensus, lack of affinity with nature, ostentation, pomposity, and control through economic imperialist oppression.

Until *The Fighting Prince of Donegal*, the ultimate arbiter of power and authority in these films is always ultimately benevolent, with the disruptive force a scheming or usurping underling. In *Robin Hood*, the antagonists are the King's brother, Prince John and his right-hand man, the Sheriff of Nottingham; in *The Sword and the Rose*, it is a nobleman of the Royal Court, the Duke of Buckingham (Michael Gough); and in *Rob Roy*, it is the Scottish Royalist, the Duke of Montrose (again played by Gough). Good King Richard, who departs for the Holy Land at the beginning of the film, explicitly states that 'The strength of England stems from the well-being of her humblest peasant'. Furthermore, Robin Hood's personal crusade against the extortionate taxes levied by Prince John and the Sheriff of Nottingham is imbued with moral authority by the approval of the legitimate representatives of Church (unorthodoxly personified by Friar Tuck) and crown (the Queen Mother, and the returned King Richard, who bestows on Robin an earldom). High taxes imposed on simple, poor folk by already-wealthy elites are always an unethical form of social control. In *Robin Hood* and *Rob Roy*, they are the catalyst for armed revolt.

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It is important to expand upon the importance of time and place within these films. It is worth recounting a brief exchange in which Robin Hood and Will Scarlet (Anthony Forwood) attempt to enlist Little John (James Robertson Justice) to their cause:

Will: Would you be of a mind to join us, John Little? You would eat fresh meat every day, sleep soft, have money in your poke.

Robin: So be it, you shoot your own meat and make your own bed and collect your own wages to give to poor souls in greater need.

Authentically shot on location in Sherwood Forest, the film's settings are so attractive, so seductively evocative of Shakespeare's Arden at its brightest, most verdant and languorous, that Robin and Will's appeal seems less a necessary reminder of nature's potential severity than an invitation to partake in its manifold pleasures. The unspoken dialectic here is between the forest's unalloyed pastoralism and the corrupt civilisation the rebels have left behind, an antithesis at the heart of Raymond Williams's masterful study, *The Country and the City* (1973). As Williams reminds us in relation to the rural/urban opposition,

the English experience is especially significant, in that one of the decisive transformations, in the relations between country and city, occurred there very early and with a thoroughness which is still in some ways unapproached. (2)

Pre-industrialisation is now a distant memory; the recurrence of such pastoral narratives in the Twentieth and Twenty-first centuries no longer bespeak anxiety for a feared future loss (as to some degree it was with Shakespeare, Twain, Tocqueville and Thoreau) as much as nostalgia for an imagined past where man and nature were perfectly aligned. This is not quite

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the Eden-like, Golden Age manifestation of pastoralism as Williams understood it, but more akin to his later, more mediated form – a rural agrarianism where ‘man had to earn his bread in the sweat of his brow’ but where, equally, the sun never sets and harvests are plentiful (32).

The Arcadian resonances of the pastoral ‘Green World’ (as Northrop Frye called it) are definitively invoked in Disney’s *Sherwood Forest*. Filmed on location, in high summer, its bright verdancy disavows the overt romanticism of *As You Like It* (1599) and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1605), both typically recreated on stage, as was the Sherwood Forest of the silent-era Douglas Fairbanks adaptation (Allan Dwan, 1922). But a rougher-hewn version of the same pastoral landscape is presented in the vast plains, craggy outcrops and rolling heather of *Rob Roy*’s and *Kidnapped*’s Scottish highlands and Irish moors, the last outposts – at least in the British Isles – of an emboldening natural world rapidly overtaken by human activity. These films all posit a central, structuring opposition between the unspoiled landscapes at their heart and an invasive, creeping urbanisation marked by antithetical associations, which reveals a central, and justifiable, anxiety that the encroachment of civilisation, by entering the wilderness, must destroy it.

Whereas *Treasure Island*, *Robin Hood*, *Rob Roy* and *Kidnapped* all have very definite – if highly commodified and stereotyped – senses of time, place and nationality, *The Sword and the Rose* is comparatively generic. It is this fact, perhaps as much as the symbolic and dramatic potential of an aggressively expansionist England held at bay by brave and stoic Scottish and Irish rebels, that led Disney away from the English milieu. In many ways, *The Sword and the Rose* is a continuation of *The Story of Robin Hood*’s treatise on the individual’s crusade against state intrusion. The film centres on the romance between Henry VIII’s (James Robertson Justice) sister, Princess Mary (Glynis Johns), and a noble commoner, Charles Brandon (Richard Todd), the Duke of Sussex. The couple’s love affair is

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interrupted by courtly *realpolitik*, as King Henry brokers Mary's marriage to the elderly King Louis XII (Jean Mercure) of France. After Louis's death, a desperate Charles and Mary secretly wed without royal permission, an act which leads to Henry sentencing Charles to death, before Mary manages to talk him round and bless the marriage. The needs of the nation, of the royal line, and of the feudal social structure, are here balanced against those of the heart: a recurrent antithesis in the historical romance genre.

Robin Hood and *Rob Roy*, the closest in spirit to the folktale tradition, are predicated on a distillation of valorised national characteristics rooted in ideals of community and consensus, pleasurably embodied in a single heroic figure. Robin Hood and Rob Roy are heroic archetypes, but whereas Charles possesses many of the same virtues, he lacks broader frames of significance. He is not England's champion, but a conventional hero interested only in his marriage suit. *The Sword and the Rose* says little about England, aside from introducing the impression – more strongly present in the later films – that it is a nation governed by self-serving, Machiavellian politicians and scheming, treacherous noblemen. The trappings of historical authenticity – courtly dances, banquets, wrestling contests, duels between noblemen, lute music, various kinds of period finery in costume, mosaics, and so on – are maintained, but there is little of substance. 'The idiom of the dialogue', as the *Times* complained, 'wavers disastrously between mock-Tudor and modern slang', and despite the purported advisory presence of historian Charles R. Beard, who had also provided 'technical advice' on *Treasure Island* and *Robin Hood* ('The Sword and the Rose') the *Monthly Film Bulletin* attacked the film's 'rompingly inaccurate and comic-strip' approach ('Entertainment Films'). Beard's much-publicised presence suggests that at least the appearance of historical accuracy was important to Disney. However, projections of authenticity are largely expedient; certainly, they are subordinated to the demands of narrative.

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Rob Roy moves decisively away from the English settings of the preceding films and centres on the rebel Scot, Rob Roy MacGregor (1671-1734), and his series of highland uprisings against the German-born English King George I's military forces. The film opens with the storybook-like conceit of a written prologue:

The early Eighteenth century. When England chose German George the First to be King, the Scottish Highlanders rose in revolt and fought bitterly to enthrone their own James Stuart. But the English armies marched into the Highlands crushing every uprising until only a small band of proud and stubborn Clansmen kept alive the flicker of rebellion.

Again, Disney works hard to establish a convincing historical milieu. According to contemporary publicity materials, it brought in no fewer than 500 Scots, newly returned from fighting in the Korean War (1950-53), to participate in the extensive highland battle sequences filmed on location in The Trossachs and Aberfoyle, near Stirling (Berg). Another blatant public-relations exercise was engaging Mrs. Euing Crawford 'to supervise the weaving of original Scottish tartans to be used in the film' ('Film of "Rob Roy"'). By this point, it seems, British reviewers were more accepting of Disney's commodifications of British history. The *Manchester Guardian* noted the film's placement in 'an international, supranational world' (Hope-Wallace), and the *Catholic Herald* acknowledged that Rob Roy, 'Like Robin Hood, exists partly in history, partly in legend' (Conway, 'A "Western" Over the Border').

This is 'legend' with distinct ideological overtones, though. Walt Disney may have regarded the swashbuckling *Rob Roy* as little more than a 'Scottish western', but, in contrast to Richard Todd's just, heroic Scottish protagonist, the English are gratuitously murderous and conspicuously lacking in honour and nobility ('A "Western Over the Border'). In an early exchange between the sympathetic royalist highlander, the Duke of Argyll (James

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Robertson Justice), and a bloodthirsty British army general, Cadogan (Martin Boddey), the latter reports that he has 4,000 mercenaries ‘from the continent’ at his command, ready to ‘sweep through the highlands with fire and sword’. Cadogan then threatens to report Argyll’s refusal to wipe out the rebels to the British Prime Minister, Walpole. The fact that the English forces should need to recruit continental mercenaries to bolster their forces hardly reflects well on the invaders, to say nothing of their persistent eagerness to resort to violence instead of negotiation. A far cry from such presumed riff-raff, the highlanders are, Argyll claims, the ‘finest men in the world’, fighting for a righteous cause. Argyll’s proud Highland tones sharply contrast with the practiced, genteel Englishness of his treacherous, scheming fellow Scot, the Duke of Montrose, who attempts to inveigle himself into Royal favour.

Ultimately, in allowing Argyll and Rob to bypass the perfidious British Prime Minister Walpole (Michael Goodliffe) and deal directly with King George (Eric Pohlmann), the film posits a compromise. The largely-unseen Walpole is imbued with typical politician’s vices: deviousness, ruthlessness, and cowardly anonymity in the name of good policy. But the corruption does not extend to the very top – King George, like Rob, is a man of honest principle. Rob symbolically offers his sword to the King, who returns it, explaining, with a contemptuous glance at Montrose: ‘The king does not fear the bold enemy. The king fears only the self-seeking friend’. George playfully remarks that Rob is ‘a great rogue’; Rob sincerely replies, ‘And you, sire, are a great king’. The exchange plays the king’s primary intended meaning, of ‘infernal nuisance’ (which rather trivialises the losses incurred by both sides), against Rob’s interpretation of the word as ‘illustrious’, ‘sublime’. Thus the film allows Rob Roy a personal victory, with his personal honour intact, his clan afforded amnesty and the fighting temporarily suspended. But English imperialism is ultimately excused – at the expense of the Scots’ right to self-governance and self-defence – through the absurd

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conceit that a nation's invasive colonialist policies are excusable if the man putatively in ultimate charge is gentlemanly and honourable.

While *Rob Roy*, as with the later *Kidnapped*, articulates basic affiliation with Scotland and the Scots people, ultimately its broader worldview is as confused as that its originator, Walt Disney himself. Its sympathies with the Jacobite cause are almost forgotten in the film's ending, where the old order is restored and the rebellion subdued. The only way this ending can plausibly be sustained in light of what has gone before is by transferring the animus from the German-born King to the contemptible Scottish agitator, Montrose. But if King George is not the objectionable figure he is made out to be, and the rebels' initial rejection of him is more a reflection of their racial prejudices than his ability to rule, then the fundamental assumption that the Jacobite cause is just, as Walt Disney himself appeared to believe, is insupportable. In fact, the film relinquishes its support for the Jacobites in the name of restoring order. Perhaps this reflects its obligations, as a family film, to draw a firm moral lesson (or to reaffirm the ideological status quo); alternatively, it may have more to do with not offending English sovereignty, and, moreover, potentially alienating a valuable market. These films remained popular in England. *Rob Roy* was selected for display at the 1953 Royal Film Show, attended by Queen Elizabeth II, a fact which bespeaks the film's ideological legitimacy in the eyes of the British establishment.

Disney's adaptation of Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1886) articulates many of the same nationalistic concerns but posits a similar symbolic rapprochement between the conflicting nations. The film's central figure, young lowland Scottish loyalist David Balfour (James MacArthur), is coded as English, embodying qualities of intelligence, reason, compassion and bravery. Conversely, it is in the thoroughly Scottish figure of rebel highlander Alan Breck Stewart (Peter Finch) where heroic characteristics of nobility and righteousness are localised. These two men, each holding enviable traits lacking in the other, work towards a

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mutual reciprocity. While both possess a strong moral compass, David represents values of order and restraint, Breck of instinct and impulse. Just as David successfully reproves Breck for the latter's tendency towards barbarous brutality, the more worldly, cynical and battle-worn Breck instils in David a healthy disregard for unregulated authority, which, as he learns over the course of the film, often leads to abuses of power. It is tempting to see in David and Breck's friendship a microcosm for the united Scotland in which Stevenson grew up. Moreover, at the time of Stevenson's writing the Jacobite uprisings may have been viewed as sufficiently distant historical events as to facilitate this ultimately hopeful image of unification between loyalist and rebel Scots, and, by extension, between England and Scotland.

Disney's decision to retain one specific scene from the novel, which might easily have been excised, is worth considering. Here, Alan Breck comes face to face with an old rival, Robin MacGregor (Peter O'Toole), the son of notorious highlander rebel, Rob Roy. MacGregor initially threatens to betray Breck for the £100 reward on his head. The two men proceed to exchange insults, seemingly preparing for a duel with cutlasses. At this point, their elderly host, Duncan (Abe Barker), suggests that the two men, both renowned pipers, resolve their differences by determining which possesses the greater musical skill. Both perform creditably, and each gains the respect of the other. Breck charitably accedes to MacGregor's superiority, and they part amicably. Skill with the bagpipes is clearly figured here as a quintessentially Scottish marker of masculine potency, on an equal footing with prowess with a sword or cutlass. A powerful symbol of regional identity, the bagpipes connote kinship and shared frames of references. The inclusion of this scene – outwardly incongruous in what is primarily a fast-paced adventure narrative – seems designed to bolster the film's shaky credentials as Scottish 'national' cinema. But the bagpipes are less a quotidian reality of life in Scotland than an easy reference point for outsiders (English and Americans alike). They

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relate to what Colin McArthur has called the ‘Scottish Discursive Unconscious’, which, as it operates in (specifically Hollywood) cinema, ‘constructs Scotland as a timeless melange of bagpipes, kilts, castles, clansmen, heather, whisky and mist’ (viii).

The Fighting Prince of Donegal, released shortly before Walt Disney’s death in 1966, also draws heavily on such familiar iconographies. Moreover, it is perhaps the most overtly political of Disney’s British films. In its rather naïve, idealistic portrayal of armed rebellion against socio-political oppression, and its heavy investment in the figure of the lone rebel, it is as heavily bound up as its predecessors with vague but complex ideologies of freedom and individualism. The major point of difference is that it is almost impossible not to view *The Fighting Prince of Donegal*, which focuses on the campaign of the Prince of Donegal, ‘Red’ Hugh O’Donnell (Peter McEnery), against the occupying military forces of Elizabeth I, as a deliberate allegory for the current political situation in Northern Ireland. The earlier films, admittedly, had invested in righteous heroes battling against a tyrannical English state determined to advance its interests through violent conquest. But even if such films had not shown the ultimate heads of state as being essentially benevolent – witness King Richard in *The Story of Robin Hood*, King Henry VIII in *The Sword and the Rose* and King George I in *Rob Roy* – such representations have little contemporary political resonance, beyond, perhaps, faintly re-emerging feelings of nostalgia and patriotism. The historical feuds these earlier films depict had long since been consigned to the history books, or to folk tale narrative.

But *The Fighting Prince of Donegal*, produced just prior to the start of the modern troubles in Northern Ireland, mirrors unresolved tensions and anxieties that, even in the relatively stability of the mid-1960s, occasionally descended into sectarian violence. The presence of a permanent British occupational force was considered as inflammatory by contemporary Irish republicans as by ‘Red’ Hugh O’Donnell. *The Fighting Prince of*

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Donegal again pre-empted accusations of nationalist fervour by localising English villainy in the treacherous soldier, Captain Leeds (Gordon Jackson), who is motivated by jealousy at his non-aristocratic background. Yet, on this occasion, the audience is not presented with a more acceptable personification of English rule. The unseen Queen Elizabeth remains a shadowy, unknowable presence, never humanised or rationalised. In one telling remark, it is explained that she ‘does not bluff. She’s a politician, yes, but she’s a realist. She’d hang her grandmother if there was a threat to the crown’. This hard, unyielding ethical pragmatism is contrasted with the brash, ebullient and unashamedly passionate O’Donnell, who believes that ‘victory goes to him that takes the greatest risk’.

As ever, Disney ensures that such political concerns do not overwhelm the child-friendly narrative. The treatment of these themes remains largely escapist; almost, but not quite, reducible to the American periodical *Boys’ Life*’s seductive references, in its review, to ‘leaping parapets, creeping through dungeons, swimming moats, [and] storming walls’ (‘Films’). O’Donnell’s passionate claim to individual agency when insisting that people must fight for ‘a belief, a faith, a necessity’ is countered by the patronisingly comical depiction of the Irish as a social group. As Jeffrey Richards notes, the Irish are portrayed as ‘a gang of lovable roughnecks, whose two principal concerns are boozing and fighting, and the resistance to the rule of the English seems little more than an excuse to provide the latter’ (2014, 93). This disavowal of seriousness reaches its fullest extension in the ludicrous final scene, in which a banquet to celebrate O’Donnell’s ‘victory’ over the English merrily descends into a celebratory drunken brawl, giving free rein to the Irish’s ostensibly natural inclinations to rambunctious play. As with Disney’s visions of the Scottish rebels, the representation may be fond, but it is neither accurate nor complimentary.

In many respects, these are British films only in the technical sense. Most British reviewers apparently viewed them basically as Hollywood productions, for good or for ill.

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Others identified a disorientatingly alien quality, as in the *Times*' review of *The Fighting Prince of Donegal*, which queried 'why there are so few authentic Irish accents in a film about early Irish nationalism' ('Novel into Film Won't Go'). Certainly, the films' casts, like their narratives, were assembled from multiple sources, raising questions of cultural hybridity. Yet what might appear to be hybridity is, in reality, commodification, akin to the quixotic visions of Scotland in *Brigadoon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1954). As in that film, Disney's British productions bespeak exoticism rather than cultural interplay. Their lavish location filming is reminiscent of a travelogue: theatrically-shown travel documentaries dating from a time before inter-continental travel became widely affordable. As the *Manchester Guardian* observed in its review of *Rob Roy*:

the picture of Scotland, if sometimes idealised a little, is always highly flattering. We are in the Trossachs during an unusually fine spell, and as advertisements for the Scotland for tourists the scenery here shown leaves most of the advertisements to be seen in the New York prints far behind [...] This Scotland may not be wholly believable but the hero has the same sort of relation to reality as Robin Hood has to Nottingham, and Madam Butterfly to Nagasaki. (Hope-Wallace)

What is at stake is not 'real history', though the implication that there is no ideology at work here should be treated with scepticism. Rather, possible tension points that might disturb or distract from the films' child-friendly affirmations of freedom and individualism are toned down, bowdlerised or excised. This includes *Treasure Island*'s more graphically violent passages, *Kidnapped*'s occasional word of Gaelic, and the unattractive brutality of the historical figures whose exploits inspired the sanitised and domesticated heroes of *Rob Roy* and *The Fighting Prince of Donegal*. In short, serious and sustained engagement with

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indigenous socio-political issues beyond the symbolic level is seen to be expedient, irrespective of whatever aspirations to historical authenticity Walt Disney may have held.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the films' predictably inconsistent handling of these complex socio-political issues is less important than the fact that – in supposedly apolitical children's films – they are raised in the first place. An ever-increasing body of scholarship seeks to uncover and analyse the ideological function of children's films and family films.² Even today, it is widely assumed that Disney films are apolitical. A recent study of Disney's global audiences across 18 countries found that 'over 93 percent of respondents agreed that Disney promoted fun and fantasy, while over 88 percent agreed on happiness, magical and good over evil' (Wasko and Meehan, 334).³ Furthermore, the same study observed that 'resistance to study or criticism of Disney was especially marked in the USA' (331). Such resistance testifies to the success of Disney's insistent representation of itself, over eight decades, as a purveyor of fantasies that rise above parochial and historically-bound matters of politics and nationality. However, the films examined here reveal Disney strategically appropriating stories from other cultures and purposely redeploying and reconfiguring them, both to serve its own ideological ends and to ascribe to its preferred worldview. Disney films, and child-orientated films more generally, have often insulated themselves from accusations of politicising children's culture with the disingenuous defence that they are fundamentally escapist, and merely reflect the values of the majority. But even pleasure itself – especially when channelled through reassurance – is blatantly ideological.

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These films articulate a quintessentially North American ethos of individualism; but they can also be located in the United States of the 1950s. Kevin J. Harty avers that *The Story of Robin Hood* ‘nods repeatedly in the direction of McCarthyism and its obsession with the “enemy within”’ in Prince John’s crusade to uncover traitors amongst his own people (134). As Douglas Brode argues, Disney’s interest in Rob Roy was as a means of expressing ‘his own historical interest in discovering historical justifications for violent revolt’ (63). In his personal introduction to the film’s October 1956 TV broadcast, Disney observed of Rob Roy that ‘English history [...] tells us he was a *rogue*; the Scots tell us he was a *hero*!’ The observation is historically dubious – Rob Roy, a bandit distrusted by both sides in the conflict, is far from the all-conquering national hero in Scotland that Disney implies – but this representation certainly accords with Hollywood’s similarly sanitised portrayals of Scottish heroic rebels Robert the Bruce (previously featured in Disney’s short ‘So Dear to My Heart’ [Hamilton Luske and Harold D. Schuster, 1949]) and William Wallace. ‘One man’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter’, as Brode observes, and from this presupposition it is only a small step to the studio’s far more blatant allegorical intervention in the then-current situation in Northern Ireland with *The Fighting Prince of Donegal* (63). But the recurrence of such narratives as Hollywood’s hugely popular William Wallace biopic, *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995), points to a broader desire for such narratives of freedom and individualism beyond this specific socio-political milieu.

National identity – a powerful arbiter of individual and group identity – becomes in Disney’s hands a symbolic mode of expression through which wider, and specifically American, ideologies of freedom and individualism are articulated. The British heroic outlaws Robin Hood and Rob Roy served as prototypes for the studio’s late-1950s versions of the North American rebel heroes Davy Crockett and Johnny Tremain.⁴ Like their British precursors, these indigenous figures, as Steven Watts observes, constituted ‘New World

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individuals who defended the people, battled privileged oppressors, and sought justice outside the parameters of government' (291). Walt Disney, Watts reveals, had long been actively pursuing American individualist heroes cut from the same cloth as Robin Hood and Rob Roy (291). The subsequent emergence of the American cycle confirms that Disney saw the British films, on some level, as allegories for the US condition. But the British films also pass comment on the loss of freedom and individualism within Britain, where the battles won in this fictional universe have already been lost in the 'real world' (i.e. in the audience's present). The corrupt future Englands of *The Sword and the Rose*, *Rob Roy* and *Kidnapped* reveal that the Robin Hoods have been overcome by the Sheriffs of Nottingham; self-serving politicians, aristocrats and bureaucrats have spread far and wide; the lunatics have taken over the asylum. These films thus look, with hopeful symbolism, to those few unconquered worlds where battles still need to be fought. Britain may have fallen, but there is still America: 'the land of the free'; the New Jerusalem. For Robin Hood and Rob Roy, substitute Davy Crockett and Johnny Tremain, both quintessential embodiments of American individualism. And for the few remaining pastoral outposts of the pre-industrial British Isles, read the similarly unspoiled, and far more accessible, plains of the American west.

Notes

¹ See Steven Watts's *The Magic Kingdom*, Nicholas Sammond's *Babes in Tomorrowland*, and particularly Justyna Fruzińska's *Emerson Goes to the Movies*.

² See particularly Noel Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film*, M. Keith Booker, *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films*, and Noel Brown and Bruce Babington's collection *Family Films in Global Cinema: The World Beyond Disney*.

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³ Similarly affirmative responses to the Disney Company and its products were registered in the smaller-scale audience studies undertaken for Michael Real's *Mass-Mediated Culture*, and for Paul Wells's *Understanding Animation*.

⁴ As David Kynaston observes of British children in 1956, 'the two words invariably on their lips were "Davy Crockett", as a hit song and an avalanche of merchandise (Davy Crockett buckskin outfits, Davy Crockett bows and arrows, Davy Crockett "Whistling Pipes of Peace", above all Davy Crockett racoon-skin hats (ten million sold at 12s 6d each) relentlessly sharpened appetites for the Disney film' (*Family Britain: 1951-57*, p. 608). It is ironic that these films based on US folk heroes proved more popular in Britain than those derived from the indigenous tradition, to which they were heavily indebted.

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